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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 VIENTIANE 000536

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DEPARTMENT FOR EAP/MLS, DRL, PRM

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SUBJECT: LAO RELEASE 10 NORTH KOREAN ASYLUM SEEKERS AND TWO  
SOUTH KOREAN ESCORTS

REF: VIENTIANE 509

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Kristen Bauer, reason 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: The South Korean Embassy has told us that the Lao police in Luang Prabang had released 10 North Korean asylum seekers and their two South Korean escorts detained since last week (reftel). The two South Koreans have already departed Laos for Thailand; the 10 North Koreans are in Vientiane, being looked after by the South Korean community, and are expected to make their way to Thailand (illegally) over the next few days. End summary.

¶2. (C) The ROK Embassy First Secretary told us this morning that over the June 10-11 weekend, the Embassy's consular officer traveled to Luang Prabang with a South Korean businessman resident in Vientiane to seek the release of the 10 North Koreans and their two South Korean escorts, detained since June 2 following their release from earlier detention in Laung Namtha province. Police in Luang Prabang province told the consular officer and businessman that they were willing to negotiate the release of the group of North Koreans and their South Korean escorts, providing the arrangements were made quickly and concluded by the end of the weekend. The ROK Embassy attributed the sudden flexibility of the police to the South Korean businessman's personal connection to the chief of police in Luang Prabang. The businessman agreed to take the North Koreans into his custody, and to vouch for their quick exit from Laos.

¶3. (C) The First Secretary told us the negotiation price "had not been too much" -- about \$1,000 for the group, paid "mostly" by the South Korean businessman and in part by the Embassy. Immediately on release, the group rented a car and drove to Vientiane. The two South Koreans who had escorted the asylum seekers since they entered Laos from China quickly left for Thailand; the North Koreans, meanwhile, were taken by members of the South Korean community here to a safe house in Vientiane, where they will remain until their passage to Thailand can be arranged over the next few days. The ROK Embassy did not know, and stressed they did not want to know, how that would be done.

¶4. (C) The ROK First Secretary did not believe the MFA was aware in detail of the release arrangements, but thought the government in Vientiane had "condoned" the release in order to quickly resolve the issue. She noted that the officials in Luang Prabang continually referred to the 10 as "South

Koreans," and she thought the government may have given a wink to their nationality to avoid embarrassing admissions later that they had knowingly released North Koreans who would then enter Thailand the same way they entered Laos -- illegally. Her impression was that the Lao were simply anxious to wash their hands of the matter as quickly as possible, and saw the South Korean businessman's offer to take responsibility for the group as an invitation to end the matter.

¶5. (C) Comment: The Lao government can be practical when it needs to be. We see the case of these 10 as somewhat analogous to the DPRK asylum seeker who entered our compound early last year; in both cases, the GoL decided to look the other way and engage in some creative distortion rather than make an issue of the presence of North Koreans on their soil.

Where the government told us last year that the asylum seeker in our compound had not entered Laos legally and therefore technically was "not their responsibility," in this latest case the government seems to have decided to simply pretend the group was South Korean, giving them a perfect excuse to hand them over to the South Korean community. This way, the Lao have plausible deniability should the Thai raise this issue at some point after the group crosses the Mekong.

¶6. (C) The South Korean Embassy, like us, believes that attention on this case from NGOs was not helpful. Rather, it served to elevate the case in the eyes of the government and could very well have wrecked negotiations for their release. Focusing press attention on these asylum seekers when they are detained in Laos is counterproductive and could backfire. At the same time, the Lao have no great interest in keeping them in custody -- although they certainly have an incentive

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to detain them for a time in pursuit of lucrative payoffs from the NGO sponsors. End comment.

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